

A Protest Song Which Will Always Be Contemporary

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Advent, December 21, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Throughout American history protest songs have mobilized popular opinion. The Revolutionary War. The Whiskey Rebellion. The War of 1812. The Labor movement in the early part of the twentieth century. They all produced protest songs. And more recently in the struggle for Civil Rights we sang, *We Shall Overcome* and *Blowing in the Wind*. Every movement has produced protest songs. Protesting taxes. Protesting slavery. Protesting racism. Protesting war.

Protest songs make American history come alive. Some colleges offer courses in American history taught from the standpoint of protest songs. Last Christmas one of my boys gave me a tape of the protest songs of Joe Hill, a labor organizer who lived in the early 1900s. Joe Hill wrote, "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over...." One of the many protest songs Joe Hill wrote was *The Rebel Girl*. He was writing about the courage and pride of working women who rebelled against abysmal working conditions. Listen to it!

There are women of many descriptions
In this cruel world, as everyone knows
Some are living in beautiful mansions
And are wearing the finest of clothes
There's the blue-blooded queen or the princess
Who have charms made of diamonds and pearls
But the only and thoroughbred lady
Is the rebel girl.

She's a rebel girl, a rebel girl
She's working-class,
The strength of this world
From Maine to Georgia you'll see
Her fighting for you and for me
Yes, she's there by your side
With her courage and pride
She's unequaled anywhere
And I'm proud to fight for freedom
With a rebel girl.

Though her hands may be hardened from labor

And her dress may not be very fine
But a heart in her bosom is beating
That is true to her class and her kind
And the bosses know that they can't change her
She'd die to defend the workers' world
And the only and thoroughbred lady
Is a rebel girl.

When I hear *The Rebel Girl* I think of the Virgin Mary: ... *she's there by your side, With her courage and pride. She's unequalled anywhere.* Try to remove from your imagination all those Christmas card depictions of the Virgin Mary with her halo and soft glow. Her soft, white, delicate fingers. Her beautiful, cover girl face. Remove all that from your mind! Imagine instead a stark, black and white photograph taken back in the 30s by Dorothea Lange of the *Farm Security Administration*. Think especially of her classic photograph entitled *Migrant Mother* holding her disheveled child. Hundreds of newspapers throughout the country picked up her photograph in March of 1936. Look at the migrant workers dark, blemished complexion! Notice her gnarled fingers and sorrowful, sunken eyes! Mrs. Lange wrote of her photography, "I'm trying to say something about the despised, the defeated... about the last ditch." When I see her picture I think of the Virgin Mary.

When I think of the Virgin Mary, I think of traditional mothers working in the home, raising children, washing dishes, ironing clothes, preparing meals, and planning menus on a limited budget. I also think of all the women who still work for less pay than their male counterparts. I think of Rosie the riveter. I think of the women of the Ladies Garment Workers' Union. I think of growing numbers of women doctors and lawyers breaking down stereotypes of what it means to be feminine. And I think of single mothers. The Virgin Mary got pregnant by the Holy Spirit before she was married. After the opening chapters in Luke and Matthew we hear nothing of her husband Joseph. Tradition says he died when Jesus was a child. She had to raise Jesus all by herself. So when I think of the Virgin Mary I think of all the single mothers trying to make a living and raise good kids. I think of the hard working woman who gets called into her employers office a month before Christmas and told she no longer has a job. Who isn't even allowed to go back to her work area to gather her personal belongings.

When I think of the Virgin Mary, I also think of her song. We usually hear a wonderful choir chanting *The Song of Mary* accompanied by an organ. But *The Song of Mary* would sound better accompanied by a banjo, guitar, and fiddle and sung by ~~Patsy Kline~~ or Loretta Lynn. *The Song of Mary* isn't a stained glass religious song. It's a protest song. And I hear it sung with an Appalachian accent, or a Detroit accent against the backdrop of Motown music, or a New York City accent rapping it out. I hear it sung to an Hispanic accent. "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*"

Years ago I read that a young priest in El Salvador was arrested for reading *The Song of Mary* in his church for one of the Scripture readings. A commander in the military government was attending the worship service. The officer's mind must have been wandering but his ears —pricked up when he heard the words from Mary's Song. After the service he arrested the priest and led him away for questioning. "Who wrote that subversive poem you read from the pulpit? Where'd you get it?" The priest angrily responded, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! You're a Catholic! You ought to know! The Blessed Virgin Mary wrote that piece of subversive literature. It's in the Bible."

In many parts of the world, and in America in particular, Christianity has come more and more to focus on how to fill our own personal needs. *Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel like you've failed? Do you need a friend? Then come to Jesus. He will meet your ever need. He will make you happy. He will make you satisfied. He will give you peace of mind.* As though Jesus were ^{some} a kind of cosmic Santa Claus. Christianity has become totally self-centered. And when some parts of the Bible are read they come across as revolutionary, dangerous, subversive. How far we've come from the message and ministry of Jesus Christ whose mother sang a protest song which will always be contemporary.

The song of the Virgin Mary is first of all a song about God. She sang of a holy, just, loving, powerful, personal God who consistently takes the side of the weak and poor over against the powerful and rich. We don't need to romanticize the poor. Poor people are sinners just like us who are more wealthy. But God has a special concern to defend the powerless and the poor over against us who are the powerful and rich. And it's a shame that the church rarely intentionally seeks new members from the ranks of the poor. We prefer solid, middle class people.

Secondly, Mary's Song is against sin. Our notion of sin has been terribly impoverished. For the last twenty years our church has focused almost exclusively on defining sexual sins. We've reduced sin to outward forms of behavior socially unacceptable to respectable middle class people. Francois Mauriac, a great Christian novelist, gave us a deeper, more perceptive understanding of sin. Mauriac could see sin in the lostness of the middle class - those well educated, virtuous, religious *but lost people* of America and Europe. "Doesn't have a point of view. Knows not where he's going to. Isn't he a bit like you and me."

Thirdly, the Song of Mary is about Christ. Her song proclaims how God has fulfilled his promise by sending his son. It's a message about the incarnate Word, the crucified Messiah, the resurrected Lord and the way he delivers us from the penalty and power of sin. The Virgin Mary sang of the self-denial to which the Risen Christ calls us. She sang of sacrifice and servanthood which is nearly, completely absent from modern American Christianity. The church has become kind of like a religious variety store where you come in, pay a little money, and expect to get what you want. But the Virgin Mary sings of a God who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

Finally, The Song of Mary is a call to action. You might be called, like the Virgin Mary, to risk your reputation and popularity to be the vessel by which the Lord Jesus Christ comes to your friends. You might be called to give up a vacation to work on a Habitat House in Coatesville. You might be called to be a peacemaker on your college campus or workplace.

You may be called to do something about unjust working conditions. You may be called to write poems or paint pictures expressing your dreams of the kingdom of God. Or to write music to the powerful words of the Virgin Mary. You might be called to be a prophet to shake up a complacent Christian community that increasingly sees being a church member more as a right than a responsibility for witness and service. But whatever, *The Song of Mary* is a call to action.

By God's grace RESPOND!

Let us pray: God of grace,
you chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace,
to be the mother of our Lord and Savior.
Now fill us with your grace,
that with her, we may rejoice in your salvation,
and in all things, embrace your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.
Eternal God,

as you led your people in ages past,
you direct our journey into the future.
We give you thanks that
you came to us in Jesus Christ,
and we eagerly await his coming again
that his rule may be complete
and your righteousness reign over all the world.
Then we will feast at his royal banquet,
and sing his praises with the choirs of heaven.
By your Spirit,
open our eyes to the generosity of your hand,
and nurture our souls in all spiritual gifts.

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Fill us with gratitude overflowing
that we may share life and love in praise to you,
God of all the ages,
in the gracious name of Jesus Christ, your Son,
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen.